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Contact: DPI Media Line, (608) 266-3559, media.inquiries@dpi.wi.gov

Appreciation is not enough: Action is required

An editorial in anticipation of Teacher Appreciation Week (May 8-13, 2023) by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

Last month, I had the honor of appearing before a Student Finance Committee, a group of high school students in Mount Horeb who conducted a hypothetical budget hearing with me. I provided testimony, and students followed up with questions about the needs they see in their school. Their questions were constructed as a mock exercise, but my answers don't have to be. Because their questions were about how the state budget could better support the adults working in their schools, and the solutions are all in Gov. Tony Evers' budget. Some have been carved out by the Joint Finance Committee, but we still have a huge opportunity to take action on key solutions. I wish they had been there to listen to the Student Finance Committee, because they would have heard an important message on how to appreciate and support our teachers.

During the student-run hearing, these future leaders asked me how the state budget could address teacher turnover, teacher workload, teacher mental health, a substitute teacher shortage, and student teacher retention. And every single time, they advocated for a solution: increasing teacher pay. The learners occupying the seats in Wisconsin's classrooms know this will make the most impact on their own education. That is why we asked for their ideas in the form of a Student Finance Committee hearing. It doubles as a great civics lesson, but the objective was to hear from those most impacted by the budget (students) about what they hope that impact to be. It turns out they want an investment in teacher recruitment and retention because they cannot learn and be competitive in careers and colleges if they don't have educators today who are there to teach and support them in that learning.

Thinking about it, maybe the civics lesson is really for people like myself, the elected officials who lead our great state, but also more specifically, the committee the students were trying to emulate could stand to learn a lesson from this exercise. After the students asked their questions, we turned the tables and I got to ask them a few. The first was, "What did you learn in this process?" One student had an immediate answer: "This is about public service, about using our position to do what's best for other people." I couldn't

(more)

agree more; that is exactly what being a legislator, or any elected official, is about. It is also a great description of teaching. Our Wisconsin teachers do us an incredible public service by caring for and educating our children. We owe them more than appreciation. We owe them investment. We owe them opportunities like Grow Your Own programs, stipends for internships and mentorships, and funding for programs that will support the needs of the students in their classrooms, like school nutrition and mental health services. We owe our staff working in schools the opportunity to earn a salary that will allow them to own a home in the community where they teach, or not have to rely on food assistance programs or additional jobs to support their families.

And today, we owe them action – action to change the challenges standing in the way of them providing the level of care and education they want to provide, and this state requires. Some of the K-12 provisions were cut by the actual Joint Finance Committee. I can't help but wonder what the Student Finance Committee would have done instead.

As we left Mount Horeb, one of the students thanked me for coming. She said, "This was awesome – you actually listened to us." The good news is that the Joint Finance Committee still has a chance to do the same, to make some of the impact the students want to see. They can increase per-pupil aid and revenue limits, providing more general aid funding to our school districts. Doing this will enable our districts to turn around and increase teacher pay, investing in the future of our state by supporting the educators who are teaching our children. Because we all know that by supporting our educators, we are investing in our kids.

The young people who formed the Student Finance Committee are going to lead this state one day, and I am very much looking forward to that. They are our future, and I don't expect them to lead now, but I do expect those of us who are in leadership positions to listen to them today, so they can be well prepared to lead tomorrow. They are telling us to invest in public education, pay our teachers more, and in turn, invest in them. Let's do it. Because action is how we show teachers appreciation.

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NOTE: Photos from the Mount Horeb school visit and a headshot of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly for publication are available upon request. This guest editorial is available online [on the Wisconsin DPI's news release website](#).